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# SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

BY RICK ANDERSON



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This column offers brief reviews of recent compact disc releases in a variety of musical styles and genres, covering both new releases and reissues. In alternating issues, a discographic essay focusing on a specific genre, historical period, instrument, or style of music is featured.

## REGGAE MUSIC: A HISTORY AND SELECTIVE DISCOGRAPHY

### REGGAE'S ROOTS AND ORIGINS

Although reggae is generally considered an indigenous Jamaican music, its roots are actually deeply African American. Strong strains of both calypso and the Jamaican folk music called mento are obvious both in reggae's explicit political commentary and in its occasionally ribald humor, but the harmonic and rhythmic structure of the music has its most significant antecedent in the American soul music of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>1</sup> particularly that which was being produced by the prolific Memphis, Muscle Shoals, and Detroit recording studios of those decades, and which could be heard on clear Jamaican nights over the airwaves from Miami radio stations.

The insistent off-beat rhythmic pattern of soul music and rock'n'roll (in which emphasis is typically placed on beats two and four of a four-beat measure) would find a strange and unique expression in reggae music during the late 1960s and early 1970s; in the early days of the music's development, however, that pattern appeared as the trademark galloping backbeat of ska, a more upbeat and dance-oriented predecessor of reggae. Ska was based on a double-time version of the basic R & B rhythmic pattern (*one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and*). This rhythm's relationship to a polka beat is obvious, though there is a significant difference between the two approaches: whereas the horn players and keyboardist in a polka band will accent beats two and four along with the drummer, in ska the guitars and horns would execute chordal chops on the "and" of each beat, creating a rhythmic pattern in which the traditionally "strong beats (one and three) are almost wholly ignored while off-beats and traditionally "weak" beats (two and four) are all given great emphasis. The resulting rhythm was both unusually complex for the Western popular music of the time and almost irresistibly danceable.

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1. Donald Clarke, ed., *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), s.v. "Reggae."

Ska was fully developed by the mid-1960s, and although Jamaica produced many fine ska ensembles, the general critical consensus holds the Skatalites, led by the great saxophonist Tommy McCook (1932–1998), as the finest exponents of ska in this period. A two-compact disc set entitled *Ska Bonanza: The Studio One Ska Years* (Heartbeat CD-HB-86/87 [1991]) offers a very fine overview of the period, including several tracks by the Skatalites.

Ska has enjoyed revivals in Europe and the United States at approximately fifteen-year intervals ever since its Jamaican heyday in the 1960s; the “second wave” ska revival in England came in the wake of the punk rock explosion of the 1970s and produced such fine bands as the Specials, Madness and the Beat (known in America as the English Beat to distinguish it from a similarly named stateside band). Many of these artists recorded for the British Two Tone label, and the best introduction to second-wave ska remains a compilation entitled *This Are Two Tone* (Two Tone CHR TT 5007 [1983]; reissued on compact disc as *Chrysalis F2 21745* [1996]). In the early 1990s a similar revival occurred, this time centered in the United States, and led to the national success of such modern ska bands as the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Less Than Jake, and Reel Big Fish. The Mighty Mighty Bosstones’ *Let’s Face It* (Mercury 534472 [1997]) and Dance Hall Crashers’ *Honey, I’m Homely* (MCA MCAD-11676 [1995]) both illustrate nicely the degree to which jazzy ska and aggressive punk rock had blended by the mid-1990s, while the Toasters’ *Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down* (Moon Ska 123 [1997]) harks back explicitly to the British second-wave style.

#### SKA BECOMES ROCK STEADY

Ska had a relatively limited expressive range, and it was inevitable that change would follow quickly upon its popular acceptance. That change came in the latter part of the 1960s. Given the music’s galloping speed, it was also inevitable that it would change principally by slowing down, and that is exactly what happened;<sup>2</sup> the resulting style came to be known as “rock steady.” Rock steady was typified by a more deliberate, if no less bouncy and elastic, rhythm. As the 1960s progressed, that beat eventually thickened into what is now generally recognized as reggae’s basic rhythmic pattern, one which de-emphasizes the first beat of each measure—sometimes eliminating it entirely, to create a pattern known as “one drop”—and places chordal chops on beats two and four and a drum accent on beat three. (The more militant “rockers” style, in which a drum

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2. Simon Broughton, ed., *World Music: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1994), 525–26.

accent is evenly distributed throughout the measure to create a more martial mood, developed shortly thereafter and flourished briefly in the mid-1970s.)

Rock steady eclipsed ska in popularity quite suddenly and completely in the dancehalls and open-air “sound system” dances of Kingston. Artists such as Leonard Dillon (b. 1942), Ken Boothe (b. 1948), and Desmond Dekker (b. 1943) all made significant records during this period, and Dekker’s song “Israelites” was among the first worldwide hit singles of the early reggae period. One of the most consistently impressive compilations of material from this era is *Lloyd Daley’s Matador Productions 1968–1972* (Heartbeat CD-HB-92 [1992]); Dekker’s work is well represented on the Rhino collection *Rockin’ Steady: The Best of Desmond Dekker* (R2-70271 [1992]).

#### RASTAFARI AND REGGAE’S CLASSICAL PERIOD

As the sound of reggae changed, so did its lyrical content. The lyrics of ska and rock steady songs had always featured a mixture of the earthy and the sacred, but with the onset of the 1970s the music’s message came to focus predominantly on spiritual and political matters—or, in the local parlance, “roots and culture.”

During this period, reggae music’s lyrical themes came to be dominated by the Rastafarian worldview. A biblical and millenarian religion based largely on the teachings of black nationalist Marcus Garvey and on idiosyncratic interpretations of certain key passages of Old Testament scripture supporting the belief that Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie (born Ras Tafari Makonnen) was the second incarnation of Jesus Christ, Rastafarianism combined the strict dietary laws of Levitical Judaism with a Nazarene approach to personal grooming (resulting in the hairstyle known as “dreadlocks”) and a belief in the use of marijuana (“herb”) as a religious sacrament and tool for meditation.<sup>3</sup> Rastafarianism is not a creedal religion and the philosophies espoused by Rastafarians can vary across a fairly broad spectrum, but there are some core doctrines; these include an often strident African nationalism, political and social separation from Babylon (i.e., European culture and its influences), and the divinity of Haile Selassie.

The central themes of Rastafarian doctrine are represented and developed in hundreds of songs from the period by such artists as Kerry “Junior” Byles (b. 1948), Max Romeo (born Maxwell Smith, 1947), Burning Spear (born Winston Rodney, 1947), and Bob Marley (born

3. John Bowker, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Rastafarians.”

Robert Nesta Marley, 1945). Rastafarian philosophy informed almost all of the religious and political songs that dominated the Jamaican charts during this period, and even many of the romantic ones, which frequently couched a lover's pleas in explicitly religious terms.

Much as Catholic and Protestant doctrine and liturgy gave rise to many of the landmark musical works of the Renaissance and baroque periods, so Rastafarianism formed the philosophical foundation for most of the truly noteworthy works in the reggae canon. These include such classic albums as the Abyssinians' *Satta* (Azul P 0212 [1976]; reissued on compact disc as Heartbeat CD-HB-120 [1993] with the title *Satta Massagana* and an expanded tracklist), Junior Murvin's *Police and Thieves* (Island ILPS 9499 [1977]; reissued on CD as Island 063 378 [2003] with an expanded tracklist), and Bob Marley's *Exodus* (Tuff Gong/Island ILPS 9498 [1977]; reissued on CD as Tuff Gong/Island 258 128 [2001] with a second disc of bonus material).

#### DUB AND THE DEEJAY

During the roots-and-culture era, the reggae subgenre known as "dub" came into its own as well. Since the 1960s it had been common for thrifty producers, when releasing a song as a single, to put the regular vocal version of the song on the A-side and an instrumental version of the same song on the B-side (thus filling both sides without incurring the cost of a new recording). By the early 1970s, the practice of drastically remixing that instrumental track—dropping instruments and voices in and out of the mix and embellishing them with such effects as echo, delay, and artificial reverberation—had become popular.<sup>4</sup> This art form was referred to as "dub" or "version," and it achieved its full expression in the work of such celebrated producers of the time as Augustus Pablo (born Horace Swaby, 1954–1999), Edward "Bunny" Lee (b. 1941), Lee "Scratch" Perry (born Rainford Hugh Perry, 1936) and, above all, Osbourne "King Tubby" Ruddock (1941–1989), who is still generally regarded as the greatest exponent of dub. Collections of dub mixes from the 1970s remain very popular; notable releases include a spectacular compilation of vintage King Tubby mixes titled *Dub Gone Crazy: The Evolution of Dub at King Tubby's 1975–1977* (Blood and Fire BAFCD 2 [1995]) and the classic Augustus Pablo–King Tubby collaboration *King Tubbys [sic] Meets Rockers Uptown* (Yard DSR 4710 [1977]; reissued on CD as Shanachie SH 45059 [2004] with an expanded tracklist). The title track of the latter is regarded by some as the most expert example of dub ever recorded.

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4. Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton, eds., *Rough Guide to Reggae* (London: Rough Guides, 2001), 227.

Dub mixes were a popular feature at Kingston's outdoor "sound system" dances. While these dances featured the hottest current hits, they also acted as a sort of test field for new recordings; a producer would record a new song and quickly send the master tape to a local pressing plant, where it would be cut onto a vinyl "special" or "dub plate" usually bearing a blank white label. This would be delivered to a favored sound system operator, who would test the dancing audience's reaction to see whether the song was worthy of wider release. The purpose of the blank label was to discourage spies from competing sound systems, who would routinely scout rival "sounds" to see which songs were being most enthusiastically received and which producers were providing material to their competitors. Conflicts between competing sounds could turn violent, even deadly, and it was not unheard of for one operator to send thugs to instigate fights or destroy equipment at a rival's dance.<sup>5</sup>

In the Jamaican parlance of this time, the one who chose the discs to spin and who operated the turntables at a dance was referred to as the "selector." By the beginning of the 1970s, sound systems had come increasingly to feature "deejays" as well. Although the term obviously derives from "disc jockey," the deejay was actually a prototype of the modern rapper (in current hip-hop usage, the selector is called a DJ and the rapper is called an MC, for "master of ceremonies" or "microphone controller"). Deejays would "toast," or improvise rhymes over dub mixes spun by the selector, to the great delight of the assembled dancers and, as time went on and the popularity of the practice grew, to the delight of Jamaican and English record buyers as well.

Not the first but perhaps the greatest of the early reggae deejays was Ewart "U Roy" Beckford (b. 1942), whose tenure as resident deejay at Duke Reid the Trojan's sound system sent shockwaves through the reggae community in the early 1970s. Acolytes and imitators multiplied quickly, including the talented Dennis Alcapone (born Dennis Smith, 1946) and the more derivative but also undeniably gifted I Roy (born Roy Samuel Reid, 1944). Numerous fine collections of deejay recordings from this period are available; among the most worthwhile are *If Deejay Was Your Trade: The Dreads at King Tubby's 1974–1977* (Blood and Fire 001 [1995]) and U Roy's masterpiece *Version Galore* (Virgin Front Line FL 1018 [1978]; reissued in 2002 as a two-CD set with a greatly expanded tracklist as Trojan TJDDD 056).

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5. David Katz, *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 7–8.

## DANCEHALL AND RAGGA

It was inevitable that the roots-and-culture period would generate a stylistic reaction of its own, and that reaction came powerfully with the beginning of the 1980s. During this decade, reggae moved away from the smoky, mystical flavors and the religious/political lyrical focus of the roots-and-culture period to become more rhythmically aggressive and, significantly, much more violent and explicitly sexual in nature. While roots reggae remains popular in England and the United States two decades later, dancehall and its variants have been the music of choice among the majority of Jamaican reggae fans since the late 1980s.

The development of the dancehall style was a gradual process that began with a slowly increasing emphasis on deejays over singers (mirroring the emergence of rap in the United States), and then on electronically produced rhythms over traditional instrumentation. The harder, more electronic style of dancehall came to be called “ragga,” and it gradually edged more traditional dancehall sounds out of the reggae scene as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s. As electronic percussion and synthesizers pushed guitarists, bass players, and wind players from the studio, reggae’s rhythms became more minimalist and more robotic; in some cases, entire songs were built on an aggressive and unchanging three-against-two triplet pattern. The combination of raw, aggressive rhythms and “slack” (i.e., sexually explicit) rapping had come to typify the dancehall-ragga sound by the early 1990s, and has continued to do so ever since, although “conscious” (i.e., overtly Rastafarian) dancehall deejays have been gaining popularity in recent years as well. Significant artists in the early dancehall category include singers Barrington Levy (b. 1964) and Lincoln “Sugar” Minott (b. 1956) and deejays Yellowman (born Winston Foster, 1956) and Eek-A-Mouse (born Ripton Hilton, 1957); the ragga era saw the rise of such chart-topping deejays as Shabba Ranks (born Rexton Rawlston Fernando Gordon, 1966) and Beenie Man (born Moses Davis, 1972).

For a good overview of the transitional dancehall sound of the early 1980s, see *Haul and Pull Up Selector: Heavy Weight Dancehall 1979–82* (Trojan TJDDD061 [2003]), which focuses on singers rather than deejays. The inaugural release in the Greensleeves label’s Ragga Ragga Ragga series (GRELCD 192 [1993]) offers a good introduction to the next phase in the music’s development (and subsequent volumes, of which there are now seventeen, trace that development up to the present time). “Conscious” dancehall has no finer exponents than Luciano (born Jepther McClymont, 1974) and Everton Blender (born Everton Dennis Williams, 1954); Luciano’s retrospective *Ultimate Collection* (Hip-O 440-069-422-2 [2003]) and Blender’s *Rootsman Credential* (Heartbeat 617727 [1999]) are both excellent.

### THE JUNGLE JUGGERNAUT

The long predominance of dancehall and ragga did not mean a complete end to change and development in reggae's sound, nor a slowdown in the emergence of new subgenres. The 1990s saw, for example, an interesting and hugely influential development in the British reggae scene. England, especially the racially mixed neighborhoods of Brixton and East London, had been host to a growing population of expatriate Jamaicans since the 1950s, and the British reggae scene has always been second only to Kingston's in its size and influence.<sup>6</sup> By the middle of the 1990s, a new sound was emerging in the nightclubs and sound systems of urban England. Combining the hard-edged digital sound of the then-popular "techno" style with the slow, melodic basslines typical of reggae and the breakbeats (funky drum interludes sampled from old soul and R & B recordings) on which American rap music had been built, the architects of this new music added a strange twist: they doubled the playback speed of those breakbeat samples, creating a mind-bending tension between the languorous reggae flavor of the bass lines and the jittery, frenetic drum patterns. The music was called "jungle" (later referred to by the more generic and less racially charged term "drum'n'bass"), and it took over London's club scene almost immediately. Like ska, its relentlessly upbeat predecessor, jungle was a style of limited expressive range and was doomed to suffer a quick death in the notoriously fickle nightclub scene, but its influence remains significant. Jungle and drum'n'bass sounds can be heard today in car commercials and sports documentaries, and the basic architectural principles of jungle deeply inform a variety of current electronic music subgenres including glitchcore, drill'n'bass, two-step, and UK garage.

Important jungle artists include Roni Size (birthdate unknown) and Goldie (born Clifford Price, 1966). A good overview of the 1990s jungle scene is provided by both the Goldie-compiled *Platinum Breakz* (Metal-headz 828783 [1996]) and Roni Size's debut collection *Music Box* (Full Cycle 01 [1995]).

### CONCLUSION

For an overview of reggae and its various subgenres from the early days of ska through the ragga period, there is no better compilation than the four-disc boxed set entitled *Tougher Than Tough: The Story of Jamaican*

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6. Gregory Salter, "Ska and Reggae Developments in Britain," in *World Music: The Rough Guide*, 535–38.



*Music* (Mango 539 935 [1993]). Beginning with an early mento song entitled "Oh Carolina" and ending with a ragga update of the same song, this collection offers an excellent overview of the history of reggae in all its stylistic variety.

### DISCOGRAPHY

Reggae aficionados will find no surprises here; the purpose of this list is not to bring obscurities to light, but to help libraries build a basic collection. All of the titles mentioned in the above essay are included in the list below, but the list also includes some noteworthy titles that are not mentioned in the essay. To assist those libraries that have either very limited budgets or very limited interest, one title in each category (usually a compilation) is given an asterisk to indicate that it is an essential purchase. In the case of many releases from the 1960s and 1970s, the discographic information is necessarily incomplete; the reggae record industry has always been characterized by ephemeral business enterprises and the loosest imaginable enforcement of copyright law, leading to multiple releases of most significant albums, many of them of dubious legitimacy. To document thoroughly all the released versions of any reggae album originally issued in Jamaica during the last few decades would be virtually impossible. Therefore, where an album has been released in both LP and CD versions, this discography includes information about what is, to the best of the author's ability to determine, the first legitimate LP release and the most recent legitimate CD version.

#### Reggae's Roots and Origins: Ska and Rock Steady

- Dance Hall Crashers. *Honey, I'm Homely*. MCA MCAD-11676 (1995), CD.
- Dekker, Desmond. *Rockin' Steady: The Best of Desmond Dekker*. Rhino R2-70271 (1992), CD.
- Mighty Mighty Bosstones. *Let's Face It*. Mercury 534472 (1997), CD.
- Toasters. *Don't Let the Bastards Grind You Down*. Moon Ska 123 (1997), CD.
- Various artists. *Lloyd Daley's Matador Productions 1968-1972*. Heartbeat CD-HB-92 (1992), CD.
- \*Various artists. *Ska Bonanza: The Studio One Ska Years*. Heartbeat CD-HB-86/87 (1991), CD.
- Various artists. *This Are Two Tone*. Two Tone CHR TT 5007 (1983), LP; reissued on CD as Chrysalis F2 21745 (1996).

#### Rastafari and Reggae's Classical Period: Roots and Culture

- Abyssinians. *Satta*. Azul P 0212 (1976), LP; reissued on CD as Heartbeat CD-HB-120 (1993) under the title *Satta Massagana*.
- Byles, Junior. *Curly Locks: The Best of Junior Byles*. Heartbeat CD-HB-208 (1997), CD.
- Marley, Bob and the Wailers. *Exodus*. Tuff Gong/Island ILPS 9498 (1977), LP; reissued on CD as Tuff Gong/Island 258 128 (2001).
- Mighty Diamonds. *Right Time*. Virgin/Front Line 34235 (1976), LP; reissued on CD as Caroline/Front Line 10329 (2001).
- Murvin, Junior. *Police and Thieves*. Island ILPS 9499 (1977), LP; reissued on CD as Island 063 378 (2003).
- \*Various Artists. *Calling Rastafari*. Night-hawk NHCD-304 (1982), LP; reissued on CD (1990).

Various Artists. *Place Called Africa*. Trojan TJDDD041 (2002), CD.

### Dub and Deejay

Mad Professor. *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad Mad Professor*. Ariwa 105 (1995), CD.

Pablo, Augustus. *King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown*. Yard DSR 4710 (1977), LP; reissued on CD as Shanachie SH 45059 (2004).

Perry, Lee "Scratch." *Super Ape*. Island ILPS 9417 (1976), LP; reissued on CD as Mango 539417 (1991).

U Roy. *Version Galore*. Virgin Front Line FL 1018 (1978), LP; reissued on CD as Trojan TJDDD 056 (2002).

\*Various artists. *Dub Gone Crazy: The Evolution of Dub at King Tubby's 1975–1977*. Blood and Fire BAFCD 2 (1995), CD.

Various artists. *If Deejay Was Your Trade: The Dreads at King Tubby's 1974–1977*. Blood and Fire 001 (1995), CD.

### Early Dancehall

Eek-A-Mouse. *Wa-Do-Dem*. Greensleeves 31 (1981), LP; reissued on CD (2001).

Levy, Barrington. *Broader Than Broadway: The Best of Barrington Levy*. Profile 1294 (1990), CD.

\*Various artists. *Haul and Pull Up Selector: Heavy Weight Dancehall 1979–82*. Trojan TJDDD061 (2003), CD.

Yellowman. *Mister Yellowman*. Greensleeves 35 (1982), LP; reissued on CD as Shanachie SH 48007 (1990).

### Late Dancehall/Ragga

Banton, Buju. *'Til Shiloh*. Loos Cannon 524119 (1995), CD; reissued as Universal 586854 (2002), CD.

Beenie Man. *Blessed*. Island 539 950 (1995), CD.

Blender, Everton. *Rootsman Credential*. Heartbeat 617727 (1999), CD.

Demus, Chaka and Pliers. *Ruff This Year*. RAS RASCD 3112 (1993), CD.

Luciano. *Ultimate Collection*. Hip-O 440-069-422-2 (2003), CD.

Ranks, Shabba. *As Raw As Ever*. Epic 47310 (1991), CD.

\*Various artists. *Ragga Ragga Ragga* (vol. 1). Greensleeves GRELCD 192 (1993), CD.

### Jungle Juggernaut: Jungle and Drum'n'Bass

Various artists. *Music Box*. Full Cycle 01 (1995), CD.

\*Various artists. *Platinum Breakz*. Metal-headz 828783 (1996), CD.

### All Genres

Various artists. *Tougher Than Tough: The Story of Jamaican Music*. Mango 539 935 (1993), CD.

